Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 7, 2023

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March 7, 8:15pm ET

Click <u>here</u> to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click <u>here</u> to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on March 7 that the hypothetical Russian capture of Bakhmut would provide Russian forces an "open road" to Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, and other critical settlements in Donetsk Oblast.¹

ISW continues to assess, however, that Russian forces lack the capability to exploit the tactical capture of Bakhmut to generate operational effects, and will likely rapidly culminate following the capture of Bakhmut. As ISW has previously assessed, Russian forces would have to choose between two diverging lines of advance after capturing Bakhmut. Russian forces could attempt to push west along the To5o4 highway towards Kostiatynivka (about 20km from Bakhmut) or could push northwest along the E4o highway towards the Slovyansk-Kramatorsk area in northwestern Donetsk Oblast (about 40km northwest of Bakhmut).² These two potential axes of advance are not mutually supporting, and degraded Russian forces would likely have to prioritize the pursuit of just one to have any chance of success - though Russian commanders have repeatedly stretched their forces too thin across multiple axes of advance throughout the invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian forces have also heavily fortified both of these routes, which are supplied by numerous ground lines of communication (GLOCs) running deep into the Ukrainian rear, and any Russian attempt to advance down these roads would likely be highly costly.³

Russian forces additionally likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to advance beyond Bakhmut, and the tactical "assault detachments" used in assaults against Bakhmut are likely unable to conduct maneuver warfare. Recent Russian advances within urban areas of Bakhmut demonstrate that Russian forces can secure limited tactical gains with infantry-led frontal assaults.4 Russian forces likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to exploit the roads (which are likely highly fortified) west of Bakhmut. As ISW has recently reported, Russian forces are increasingly relying on "assault detachments," a battalion-size element optimized for frontal assaults on fortified areas, rather than for maneuver warfare. These detachments are artillery-heavy, use simplified tactics, relegate tanks to a fire support role in rear areas, and would almost certainly struggle to effectively conduct operations beyond urban areas. A prominent Russian milblogger echoed this observation on March 7, noting that assault detachments are simply too small to "punch a wide and deep gap" in Ukrainian defensive formations and follow with tank and mechanized battalions, and called for the formation of "breakthrough brigades," a change likely far beyond the current capabilities of Russian forces in the area.6 The continuing devolution of Russian force structure towards small assault detachments using simplified tactics, combined with mounting losses among the most effective Russian troops, will likely greatly limit the ability of Russian forces to properly exploit any paths of advance opened by the capture of Bakhmut Russian forces remain unlikely to secure more than a tactical victory following 10 months of assaults.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric seeking to deter further Western military aid to Ukraine during a conference call on March 7.7 Shoigu reiterated senior Russian officials' tired claims that Western states aim to destroy Russia by providing arms to Ukraine and have

begun an information war targeting Russia. Shoigu invoked the commonly referenced historical memory of World War II to justify the war in Ukraine, calling on Russians to prevent lessons learned from defeating Nazism "to be distorted and forgotten." Shoigu claimed that Russian forces killed over 11,000 Ukrainian military personnel in February 2023, which he claimed was a 40 percent increase from Ukrainian casualties in January. Shoigu's speech did not craft any new rhetorical arguments that could shape the Russian information space and garner more domestic support for the war effort, continuing to rely on standard tropes in the absence of any Russian successes.

Shoigu also outlined long-term and likely aspirational efforts to restore and expand the Russian officer corps.⁸ Shoigu stated that the Russian military is undergoing a phased increase and needs to recruit about 18,000 students and cadets for officer training. Shoigu noted that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) needs to increase staffing at Russian universities to provide adequate training for over 280 military specialties and claimed that Russians are increasingly interested in the engineering and flight specialties. Shoigu also stated that children of Russian military personnel and students at select schools will undergo selection for military specialties before taking the necessary exams. Shoigu also noted claimed ongoing efforts by Russian forces in Ukraine to refine training processes, increase the protection of military personnel, and increase the efficiency of military operations.

Russia exchanged 130 Ukrainian prisoners-of-war (POWs) for 90 Russian POWs on March 7. The Ukrainian State Border Service reported that of the 130 Ukrainian soldiers released, 87 fought in Mariupol, including 71 Azovstal defenders. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that 90 Russian soldiers returned to Russia, and a Russian milblogger posted footage claiming to show the released Russian soldiers receiving new boots and clothes in Belgorod Oblast. O

Russian independent polling organization The Levada Center released poll results that 51 percent of Russians feel negatively toward Russians who left the country due to mobilization.¹¹ Ten percent of Russians polled indicated that they have a positive or understanding attitude toward those that left. The Levada Center poll indicated that Russians over 55 years old and those living in rural areas and cities with fewer than 100,000 residents are most likely to have negative attitudes toward Russians who left due to mobilization. The Levada Center's polling data demonstrates that the Kremlin retains a strong hold over the domestic information space. The poll did not ask questions regarding attitudes to the war itself, indicating at minimum negative feelings towards those that escaped mobilization, if not overt support for the war.

The New York Times (NYT) reported on March 7 that low-confidence and unverified intelligence reviewed by US officials may suggest that a pro-Ukrainian group carried out an attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. US officials reported that they know very little about the "perpetrators or their affiliations," but that they may be "opponents" of Russian President Vladimir Putin. 12 The NYT article emphasizes that US officials refused to disclose the nature of the intelligence and have not settled on an explanation of the Nord Stream attacks, and this leak remains low-confidence.

US Air Force General James B. Hecker, commander of US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa, and NATO Allied Air Command, confirmed on March 6 that the US has provided Ukraine with Joint Direct Attack Munition Extended Range (JDAM-ER) kits. Hecker noted that the JDAM-ERs arrived in Ukraine three weeks ago and have a range of 72km. Kussian milbloggers generally had a muted response to the announcement, with one Russian source voicing concern that JDAM-ERs will allow Ukrainian forces to launch strikes against Russian front and near rear positions without running the risk of entering Russian airspace. Another Russian milblogger remarked that Russian troops are responding to the use of JDAM-ERs with their own use of guided bombs to strike Ukrainian positions.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on March 7 that Russian forces will have an "open road" to capture key cities in Donbas. ISW continues to assess, however, that Russian forces lack the capability to exploit the tactical capture of Bakhmut to generate operational effects, and will likely rapidly culminate following the capture of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces likely lack the mechanized forces necessary to advance beyond Bakhmut, and the tactical "assault detachments" used in assaults against Bakhmut are likely unable to conduct maneuver warfare.
- Russian forces have likely captured the eastern part of Bakhmut east of the Bakhmutka River following a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from eastern Bakhmut as of March 7.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated boilerplate rhetoric seeking to deter further Western military aid to Ukraine.
- Shoigu additionally outlined long-term and likely aspirational efforts to restore and expand the Russian officer corps.
- Russia exchanged 130 Ukrainian prisoners-of-war (POWs) for 90 Russian POWs on March 7.
- Russian independent polling organization The Levada Center released poll results that 51 percent of Russians feel negatively toward Russians who left the country due to mobilization, indicating at minimum negative feelings towards those that escaped mobilization, if not overt support for the war.
- The New York Times (NYT) stated on March 7 that low-confidence and unverified intelligence reviewed by US officials may suggest that a pro-Ukrainian group carried out an attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022, but made clear this is a very low confidence assessment.
- US Air Force General James Hecker confirmed on March 6 that the US has provided Ukraine with Joint Direct Attack Munition Extended Range (JDAM-ER) kits.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.
- A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces attempt to conduct operations across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal authorities continue to place the onus of solving mobilization issues onto Russian regional authorities who then absolve themselves of ongoing Russian command issues.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to import employees of various Russian law enforcement agencies to staff vacancies in occupation administrations.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1— Luhansk Oblast (</u>Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on March 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Hryanykivka (54km northwest of Svatove), Nevske (17km north of Kreminna), Bilohorivka (10km south of Kreminna), and Spirne (25km south of Kreminna). Geolocated footage published on March 7 depicting Russian forces storming and capturing Ukrainian positions northwest of Kreminna indicates limited Russian advances. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are unable to capture Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove) and Nevske. A video posted on March 7 claimed to show personnel from the 375th Motorized Rifle Battalion of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 2nd Army Corps operating in Luhansk Oblast. Geolocated footage published on March 7 shows Ukrainian artillery striking five Russian tanks near Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna), indicating the further degradation of Russian mechanized forces in the area. Haidai stated that Russian forces have increased the number of attack waves in the Kreminna and Bilohorivka directions. Footage published on March 7 claims to show elements of the 4th Separate Mechanized Brigade of the LNR 2nd Army Corps firing rockets at Ukrainian positions near Kreminna.

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces have likely captured the eastern part of Bakhmut, east of the Bakhmutka River, following a controlled Ukrainian withdrawal from eastern Bakhmut as of March 7. Russian forces continued ground attacks in and around the city on March 7. Geolocated footage posted on March 6 and 7 shows Russian positions in eastern Bakhmut within 200m of the Bakhmutka River and Russian forces comfortably operating in areas in eastern Bakhmut where they previously had not been observed, supporting previous Russian claims that Russian forces captured the eastern part of Bakhmut and that Ukrainian troops have withdrawn to central and western Bakhmut.²⁴ Geolocated footage posted on March 6 additionally shows Russian advances in southwestern Bakhmut.²⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continue efforts to storm Bakhmut and that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks on Bakhmut itself; northeast of Bakhmut near Fedorivka (15km northeast) and Bilohorivka (20km northeast); northwest of Bakhmut near Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest), Yahidne (1km northwest) and Zalizianske (10km northwest); west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west) and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka (7km southwest). 26 Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to withdraw westward from Bakhmut.²⁷ One milblogger noted that Ukrainian troops are conducting counterattacks southwest of Bakhmut near the To504 Kostiantynivka-Chasiv Yar-Bakhmut highway to maintain access to the road.²⁸ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that the Wagner Group killed 11,000 Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut over the course of February, and other Russian sources also amplified claims of high Ukrainian losses.²⁹

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on March 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful offensive actions in the Avdiivka area near Krasnohorivka (9km north of Avdiivka), Novokalynove (10km north of Avdiivka), Kamianka (4km northeast of Avdiivka), and Severne (5km west of Bakhmut); on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Pervomaiske and Nevelske; and on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City near Marinka.³⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced 300m in an unspecified location northwest of Donetsk City.³¹ Another Russian milblogger remarked that the Russian 114th Brigade of the 1st Donetsk Army Corps (previously the 11th Donetsk People's Republic Regiment) is active north of Avdiivka and making gains in the

area.³² The milblogger claimed that the 114th Brigade is trying to capture Krasnohorivka in order to cut the E50 Donetsk City-Pokrovske highway.³³ The milblogger stressed the importance of the Avdiivka front and claimed that Russian success in this sector will pose a serious threat to Ukrainian capabilities.³⁴ Russian forces have been attempting to take Avdiivka since the summer of 2022 without significant success.³⁵ A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces advanced within Marinka.³⁶

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast on March 7. Russian milbloggers continued to warn that Ukrainian forces near Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City) appear to be preparing for an offensive against exhausted and vulnerable Russian troops.³⁷ A Russian milblogger posted footage of artillery of the 29th Combined Arms Army (Eastern Military District) striking Ukrainian fortifications in the Vuhledar direction.³⁸ The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Kaskad" tactical formation posted footage of its fighters taking Ukrainian prisoners near Vuhledar on an unspecified date.³⁹

<u>Supporting Effort—Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces attempt to conduct operations across the Dnipro River. A Russian milblogger claimed on March 7 that the Russian 126th Separate Guards Coastal Defense Brigade (22nd Army Corps, Black Sea Fleet) repelled a Ukrainian attempt to land on Velykyi Potomkin Island just south of Kherson City.⁴⁰

Russian forces are reportedly constructing defenses in Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian milblogger published a satellite image on March 7 purportedly showing Russian forces constructing defensive lines in the Zaporizhia direction.⁴¹ The milblogger speculated that Russian forces could be constructing defensive lines in preparation for a Ukrainian counteroffensive in April 2023. Another milblogger posted similar satellite images calling the purported defenses the "Wagner line," indicating that Wagner Group forces may be active in this area.⁴² It is unclear if the milblogger was alluding to a new "Wagner line" in Zaporizhia Oblast or insinuating that this is somehow an extension of the current "Wagner line" previously constructed in Donbas.⁴³ A milblogger amplified footage on March 7 purportedly showing 291st Guards Motor Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) forces firing on Ukrainian positions in the Zaporizhia direction.⁴⁴

Russian forces continued routine shelling west of Hulyaipole and in Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts on March 7.45

<u>Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts</u> (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)

Russian federal authorities continue to place the onus of solving mobilization issues onto Russian regional authorities who then absolve themselves of responsibility for ongoing Russian command issues. Head of the Russian State Duma Coordinating Headquarters (HQ) for Assistance to Mobilized and Their Families, Dmitry Kuznetsov, announced on March 7 that the HQ analyzed the effectiveness of regional administrations in solving issues with mobilization and noted that regional authorities primarily referred "issues with service" concerns to the HQ.⁴⁶ Issues with service included problems with command, individuals performing jobs for which they were not trained, training issues, poor living conditions, and individuals deployed to an area without proper documentation of their location. Kuznetsov complained that some federal subjects, including Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Kaluga, Kursk, and Kaliningrad oblasts either do not want to or cannot resolve certain mobilization issues. Kuznetsov praised Arkhangelsk Oblast, Nizhny Nogvorod Oblast, Primorsky Krai, Lipetsk Oblast, and occupied Sevastopol for solving the most complaints without federal involvement. The Belgorod Oblast Operational HQ deflected a complaint from mobilized personnel who claim they wrongly deployed from

Belgorod Oblast to Donetsk Oblast, stating that the redeployment falls under the exclusive purview of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).⁴⁷ The MoD posted footage on March 6 of a mobilized serviceman from Irkutsk praising his living conditions and treatment by command following a March 5 complaint of such issues from mobilized personnel from Irkutsk, suggesting that the MoD is halfheartedly attempting to rebut these complaints.⁴⁸ The constant tension between Russian regions and the Russian federal government on mobilization issues will likely continue to inhibit the proper resolution of these issues.

Russian sources continue to indicate that the MoD is failing to solve these service problems, however. A prominent, Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger complained that there are extensive management and organization issues among Russian forces in border and other areas in the deep rear, causing Russian personnel who retreated from or are injured in battle to get lost and erroneously labeled as deserters.⁴⁹ The milblogger complained that the newly integrated units from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR) militias suffer the most organizational problems. The milblogger claimed that some formations established dedicated units to catch lost personnel but noted that the MoD should solve the broader organizational issues.

Russian forces, including Wagner Group, are lowering their recruitment standards under the backdrop of high losses in the ongoing battle for Bakhmut. Independent Russian outlet *The Moscow Times* reported on March 6 that the Wagner Group loosened medical requirements for individuals to serve "to remove unnecessary bureaucracy," now only refusing to take those with serious, performance-affecting conditions, those with Hepatitis B or C, and drug addicts.⁵⁰ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin accused the Russian MoD on March 4 of not allowing Wagner Group to reinforce itself with fresh recruits, including convicts.⁵¹ Russian opposition outlet *Important Stories* reported on March 6 that a St. Petersburg health facility distributed military summons to its patients.⁵² The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) released an intercepted call on March 6 in which a Russian soldier complained that the Russian military command is staffing his unit with chronically ill personnel due to a lack of suitable personnel.⁵³

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian occupation authorities continue to deploy employees of various Russian law enforcement agencies to staff vacancies in occupation administrations. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on March 7 that Russian authorities are unable to recruit willing collaborators to fill several positions in the occupation bureaucracy and are therefore sending Russian employees from the Federal Security Service (FSB), police departments, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Prosecutor's Office to occupied areas of Ukraine.⁵⁴ The particular focus on employees in law enforcement functions suggests that occupation authorities are struggling to maintain stability in occupied areas and require support from Russia due to a lack of willing Ukrainian collaborators.

Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare for September 10 local elections. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo announced on March 7 that the Kherson Oblast Central Election Commission met to discuss the upcoming election and will conduct an election campaign in both west (right) and east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, despite the fact that Russian forces have not controlled west bank Kherson Oblast since November 2022.⁵⁵

Russian authorities continue to struggle with the full integration of occupied areas of Ukraine into Russia. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on March 7 that Russian authorities are requiring those traveling from occupied Luhansk Oblast to Russia to fill out "foreign migration" cards. ⁵⁶ This suggests that Russian authorities still have not established a coherent way to integrate occupied areas into Russian border control and customs infrastructure, since in theory under Russian law travel between occupied regions of Ukraine to Russia should be the same as between Russian oblasts.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed on March 7 the February 26 UAV attack against the Russian Aerospace Forces Beriev A-50 airborne early warning and control plane at the Machulishchi Air Base in Minsk, Belarus.⁵⁷ The attack's effectiveness and perpetrators remain unclear despite Lukashenko's statement; Lukashenko stated that the attack caused only minor damage to the aircraft and did not impact its functionality and that Russia rotated another A-50 to Belarus while the damaged plane undergoes maintenance.⁵⁸ Lukashenko accused the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) of cooperating to conduct the attack using a Ukrainian-born agent who was assisted by over 20 Belarusian accomplices. Belarusian partisans claimed responsibility for the attack on February 26.⁵⁹ Russian telegram channels circulated purported interrogation footage of the attack's alleged perpetrator on March 7, during which the accused man stated he conducted the attack under the SBU's instructions.⁶⁰ ISW is unable to verify Lukashenko's attribution nor the interrogation video's veracity.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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